

Family Ministry: Program or Strategy?

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During the last decade, churches all over the country have added a new ministry to their church: Family Ministry. For larger churches, this has often included adding a part-time or full-time Family Pastor to provide leadership for this new ministry area.

However, in many cases this exciting new addition to the ministry “menu” has exacerbated some chronic problems in the church, and even in the home. As ministry specialization has increased, the various ministry of the church have tended to become disconnected, and function as “silos” rather than partners. As a result, the children’s ministry, youth ministry, men’s ministry, etc., are all doing great things, but they rarely calendar together, fellowship together, or strategize together toward common goals and objectives. Each ministry has their constituency, who they want to “reach for Christ.” Perhaps you have already been in a number of leadership meetings where this dysfunction was identified, and then, after each meeting, you all returned to your silos to continue business as usual.

Not only does this model exacerbate the historic problem of independent ministries, but it also increases competition and division among the staff team. Every church has a limited supply of resources. Those resources need to be allocated in staff and programming. Tough decisions are required. Priorities have to be set. In many church settings, the dollars go to the ministry leaders who are able to lobby the best for their cause. There are perceived winners and losers, and resentment is not far behind.

From the standpoint of the family attending the church, this can be increasingly frustrating. It is possible for a family to come to church on a Sunday morning and be hit with invitations to the next children’s outreach event, youth group overnight, women’s bible study, and men’s ministry service day...all on the same weekend. As a result our families often feel guilty that they are not more involved in all the things they are “supposed” to be involved in. However, and more importantly, our ministry silos can actually contribute to the problem of the fragmentation of the family. The family shows up for church, and they scatter!

And now we have a wonderful new silo: Family Ministry! Now we want to invite you to come to participate in our children’s ministry programs, our youth ministry programs, our men’s and women’s ministry programs, AND our brand new family programs!

I want to suggest that a forming a new department of family ministry, as an independent entity in the church structure, is a recipe for problems, frustration, and ineffective ministry. However, because it is the easiest way to jump on the family ministry wave, this is the model many churches choose.

So what is the alternative? Is there a way to approach the formation and development of family ministry that brings the staff of the church together and helps stem the tide of family fragmentation as well?

The answer is a resounding yes! But the starting place for effective change in this area lies far beneath the challenge of staff structure, programming, and resources. We must first deal with a fundamental theological and philosophical question related to the nature and the purpose of the family.

I will attempt to state the question simply, and then nuance it. The question is this, “Do we believe that the family should be a ministry target or Great Commission strategy?”

For a church that sees the family as a “ministry target” they will develop more and more programs to “help families be better.” So a premarital ministry will start, then a marriage mentoring ministry, then a few parenting seminars, financial workshops...and the list will continue to grow. What is the end goal of this myriad of programs? Usually, the end goals are not stated or identified, but if they were to be written down, they would be something like, “This program exists to help the marriages in our church be healthy, and pleasing to God.” Please don’t misunderstand what I am saying. There is nothing wrong with that goal, nor is there anything wrong with these programs. But as long as they are designed with a “target audience” mentality, the silo, independent, and program based model of ministry will continue...and I believe we will continue to see marginal effectiveness overall.

I believe that we need to make a paradigm shift to see marriages and families not as ministry targets, but as the key to our Great Commission strategy. Jesus gave the mission to the church in Matthew 28, “Make disciples.” How is the church to go about this task? What is it going to take to help people all around the world discover Christ, develop in Christ, and deploy for Christ?

I am overwhelmingly convinced that the Scriptures point to the family as God’s primary vehicle for faith formation. In Genesis 18:17-18, God gives Abraham his specific instructions for how he is to start a generational movement that will bless all the nations. The Lord says, “For I have chosen him (Abraham), so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

Abraham’s job was to make his family a discipleship center! That was the God ordained starting point for His plan to fill the earth with worshippers.

Then in the Great Commandment in Deuteronomy 6:5 and following, we find this, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. These commandments that I give to you today are to be upon your hearts.” At this point, this command that Jesus says is the most important one of all, is completely in the abstract. It is a fair question for the follower of Christ to say, “so what do I do with this

command? Where do I start in real life?" The next verse answers the question. "Impress these commands on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home..."

The first action step of the Great Commandment is for families to pass faith to the next generation. Why is that so important? Because God has ordained the family to lead a movement of multigenerational faithfulness, so that the world will be filled with worship.

I am convinced that we need to reclaim a theology of family if "family ministry" is every going to become what it needs to be. It doesn't need to be invented or developed, but reclaimed! This belief that the family is to serve as the foundational discipleship center was a cornerstone of the Reformation.

Here are two of the dozens of examples of the strong teaching on family that was found during this period.

Jonathan Edwards, 1751, in his "Farewell Sermon" -

"We have had great disputes [about] how the church ought to be regulated; and indeed the subject of these disputes was of great importance: but the due regulation of your families is of no less, and, in some respects, of much greater importance. Every Christian family ought to be as it were a little church, consecrated to Christ, and wholly influenced and governed by his rules. And family education and order are some of the chief means of grace. If these fail, all other means are likely to prove ineffectual. If these are duly maintained, all the means of grace will be likely to prosper and be successful."

Matthew Henry, 1704, in his "Sermon Concerning Family Religion"

"The pious and zealous endeavors of ministers for the reformation of manners, and the suppression of vice and profaneness, are the joy and encouragement of all good people in the land, and a happy indication, that God hath yet mercy in store for us. Now I know not anything that will contribute more to the furtherance of this good work than the bringing of family religion into practice and reputation. Here the reformation must begin. Other methods may check the disease we complain of, but this, if it might universally obtain, would cure it."

How would it change the way your church "does business" if the family was seen as an essential discipleship center? How would it change the way you work together if every staff member saw themselves as a "family minister" because they were thoroughly convinced that if the families in the church fail in their role of "making disciples" then the church is likely to fail as well? What if family ministry on the org chart was not another vertical silo with separate leadership, but it was a horizontal strategy that went through every ministry of the church, with a team of leaders ready to serve and support all the ministries?

I realize these are big questions. Digging into these questions with your church staff will be far more difficult than starting a new family ministry silo, but the silo will not get you where you want to go. If you are like me, you believe God wants to start a revolutionary

movement in the church and in the home. If that is what you want, then take the narrow and hard road. You will not find any great movements of the church that have happened because of new programming. They happen when a group of people return to and reclaim biblical theology, practice it in their own homes, and lead the church to do the same.

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Rob has been married to Amy for 12 years and has four children. He serves as the Family Pastor at Wheaton Bible Church in Wheaton, IL and has developed Visionary Parenting, which is a ministry dedicated to inspiring parents to disciple their children, and equipping churches to do the same. For tools and resources to help your family, and the families in your church, visit www.visionaryparenting.com.